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Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

It's Christmas. KEEP IT REAL.



About 1,200 to 1,500 trees are grown on one acre of land.

Stories unite families, binding generations together with the words and experiences of those before us, bringing some of the fondest memories back to life. There are many memories to reflect upon during the holidays, and for many families those memories are centered around the Christmas tree.

Whether it's a story of trekking through the snow with the family to find the perfect cut-your-own tree or the time your uncle brought home a Charlie Brown tree, there's something enchanting about having a real Christmas tree.

There is a misconception that cutting down live Christmas trees is bad for the environment. To the contrary, these trees positively benefit the environment and economy. "We as Christmas tree growers treat it like an agricultural product, so

every year we are planting trees as they are cut," shares Ashley Ahl of Northern Family Farms (NFF). "It is a renewable crop. At NFF about 300,000 trees are planted and 150,000 to 170,000 trees are harvested each year," she adds.

It takes somewhere between six to seven years for pine trees and upwards of seven to eight years for fir trees to grow before they are harvested. "During that time, the tree is taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen into our air," explains Brad Markhardt, Black River Falls FFA advisor and agricultural educator. "They also provide wildlife habitat while they are growing."

Beginning in late fall, cutting crews begin harvesting the season's trees, while a baling crew comes behind and bales the trees with twine, making them

compact to store in a shaded area without direct sunlight. The trees are then sold to retailers across the greater Midwest area. "The bottom of the tree seals up to keep in moisture," says Ashley. "When the consumer buys the tree and makes a fresh cut at the bottom, that's when the tree drinks water and is fresh again."

The fresh cut to the bottom and not letting your stand's water pan go dry are key in keeping a healthy-looking tree throughout the holiday season. "A well-cared for and well-watered tree is not a fire hazard," shares Ashley. "It also helps to keep them out of direct sunlight and away from direct heat."

Christmas trees have been a part of Ashley's family's stories since the 1950s. The advice she gives about keeping the real tree watered are tried and true. "My grandparents used to keep their tree up until Good Friday," she recalls. "That was their tradition."

In addition to the environmental benefits and aesthetic value of a real Christmas tree, who can disagree that a part of getting into the holiday spirit is that "Christmas tree" smell? "The Balsam Fir are the most fragrant and are native to Wisconsin," shares Ashley. "Fir trees are also in higher demand than pine because they are a little heavier and hold ornaments better."

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Left: The cutting crew begins harvesting the trees in late fall. Right: The baling crew uses a baler to wrap the trees with twine for compact transportation. Northern Family Farms photos (this page) courtesy of Jack Taylor Media, Black River Falls

GREENHOUSE TURNS RED FOR THE HOLIDAYS

You know Gathje's Greenhouse of Hixton as your one-stop shop for all of your spring planting needs, from perennials and annuals for your flower beds to seeds to reap your own harvest. Jim and Joan Gathje, owners, offer another commodity during the holiday season. Each year, they grow 5,000 to 6,000 poinsettia plants in over 40 varieties, which are started from a rooted cutting. "We get them at the beginning of August, and it takes 4 to 4 ½ months for them to grow into sellable plants," shares Jim.

While 75 percent of the product is sold wholesale to stores and florists in the surrounding area, there are poinsettias available for consumers to purchase at Gathje's Greenhouse through Christmas Eve Day. This is a perfect opportunity to shop local this holiday season while supporting a longtime local business that started small with Jim's parents selling tomato plants on the roadside in 1978. Jim and Joan took over the operation in 1999.

With so many varieties and shades of color to choose from, Jim and Joan can share their insight if you need help picking out the right poinsettia for you or your loved one: "The prestige red is the most uniform and hardy, while the Christmas cheer has a rich dark red color," says Jim. "Red is the most popular color, and the prestige red would be the most popular variety."

With the right care, poinsettias can be kept alive and healthy throughout your holiday gatherings and beyond by following some simple care tips. Unlike a real Christmas tree, poinsettias don't tolerate sitting in water. The main culprit of overwatering comes from the colored foil you see wrapped around the pots because it doesn't allow the water to drain away from the plant. A good way to tell if your poinsettia needs water, is by lifting it. If it feels light, it's time for water. "Joan keeps them on a saucer and brings them over to the sink to water," shares Jim. "She leaves them there to drain off the



Poinsettias naturally show their color during the holiday season.

excess water, placing them back on the saucer after they have drained."

You also want to avoid feeding your poinsettia while the plant is in bloom and showing color. After it has stopped flowering, you can give it food once a month. "They also don't like extreme temperatures," says Jim. "Keep them away from doors and windows, and don't put them in front of blowing heat."

If you have concerns because you've heard poinsettias are poisonous, that's not exactly true. While the milky sap in the plant could cause skin irritation to those with latex allergies, the plant itself isn't poisonous. "My dad ate some leaves once to prove to a customer that they weren't poisonous," Jim shares. "He told the customer to come back the next day to see if he was still alive (and he was though it's not recommended to try this)."

Poinsettias make a wonderful gift if you know someone who is home-bound and could enjoy a little Christmas joy after all the uncertainty we've had in 2020. The star flower is native to Mexico and was deemed a symbol of purity by the Aztecs who cultivated them. They weren't introduced to the United States until 1828 when the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, discovered the plant and sent cuttings back home where they now line the altars of churches and fill homes with a reminder of the star of Bethlehem. "Poinsettias naturally show a long-lasting splash of color around Christmas, and some color earlier than others," Jim concludes.—*Brandi Shramek, Member Relations Advisor*

Right: The poinsettias come in various shades and color at different times.

Below: A new Christmas mouse variety boasts rounded leaves.

Below right: The prestige red is the most uniform and hardy poinsettia variety.



Poinsettia plants retail from around \$5.95 to \$29.95 depending on the size. Gatheje's will be open Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. through Christmas Eve Day for the sale of poinsettias and wreaths. They are located at N9514 County Road FF, Hixton, 715.963.3909.

AIR SOURCE HEAT PUMPS: *Efficient and economical*

To the average person, it may be difficult to tell the difference between the outdoor units of a central air conditioning system versus an air source heat pump, as they are similar in appearance and both provide cooling. However, what the air conditioner lacks is your gain with an air source heat pump, which also provides energy efficient heating in above-freezing temperatures before using backup heat sources.

An air source heat pump (ASHP) only consumes electricity to extract the air from outside your home and transfer it inside your home as either hot or cold air. It does not consume electricity to produce heating or cooling. That's why when installed properly, ASHPs can deliver one-and-a-half to three times more heat energy to your home than the electricity they consume, making them an efficient and economical decision if you're remodeling your home, building new, or updating your HVAC system.

When Jackson Electric members Fred and Bonnie Vance made updates to their HVAC system about a year ago, they decided to install a heat pump. "During a certain window of time, the heat pump is great," shares Fred. "It works great for the cooling aspect, and we've used it for heat during the cooler days this fall."

Heat pumps absorb heat from the outdoor air and transfer it inside your home. They work most efficiently above 32 degrees and can be very effective and efficient to use in the spring and fall, especially those days that start below freezing and reach the 50s by the afternoon. At 250–300 percent efficiency, it's understandable that a heat pump is cheaper to run on these days than a secondary source of heat such as LP gas or wood heat.

Members Bruce and Marilyn Witte share a similar experience. They grew tired of checking on their outdoor wood furnace in all weather conditions. The price of logs also went up, and their decades-old fuel oil furnace needed an upgrade. They looked to other options that were convenient and cost-effective, and decided that switching to LP gas would be the best option for them. "We

wanted an LP gas furnace and central air conditioning because we had never had that before," shares Marilyn. "Our HVAC technician recommended to install an air source heat pump with LP as our backup source of heat because of its dual function for heating and cooling. We used our heat pump quite a bit this fall for heating."

In addition to the convenience of no longer running out to fill up the wood stove at 6 a.m., Bruce and Marilyn now



The air source heat pump is similar in appearance to a central air conditioning unit. However, the heat pump provides both efficient heating and cooling, unlike the air conditioning unit which only provides cooling.

have more control over the comfort level in their home, and they can switch their system's mode from heating with their heat pump to heating with their backup furnace right from the thermostat in the living room. They also have a maintenance plan to ensure their system works for years to come. "A technician comes out for routine maintenance to make sure everything is working properly and efficiently," Marilyn says.

Heat pumps are also great to consider if you're going to be remodeling. Jackson Electric employee and member Pam Bjerke was no stranger to air source heat pumps when she and her husband, Randy, began planning for their remodel. "We had used them in the south for years when we lived in military housing," shares Pam. "When we moved to Wisconsin and had to replace the central AC unit in our home, we opted for an air source heat pump because we were pleased with the efficiency, comfort level, and quietness of the systems."

When Pam and Randy recently

remodeled their new home, there was no question that the plan would include an air source heat pump. "We installed a heat pump for the main part of the home," explains Pam. "With my new system, I can switch over to my LP furnace backup right from my thermostat when the temperature gets down to between zero and 10 degrees."

You may recall reading about mini split system heat pumps in last month's issue. These units don't require ductwork and pair well with your air source heat pump for those rooms where you'd like more temperature regulation. "Our great room addition does not have traditional ductwork because of the concrete floor, so we opted for a mini split heat pump to control that room," says Pam. "We have a thermostat for each unit, which allows us to regulate the temperature throughout the house."

As mentioned earlier, heat pumps are very popular in warmer climates, where they can be used efficiently year-round. It is important to mention that in a climate like Wisconsin's, heat pumps work best for heating in above-freezing temperatures and do require a backup fossil fuel heat source. They're a win-win if you're looking for the cooling function of air conditioning, because you also get the bonus function of heat. Plus, the cost can become comparable to a central air conditioning system after participating in Jackson Electric's heat pump rebate incentive.

Qualified ASHPs are also allowed on Jackson Electric's dual fuel program for which members receive a special off-peak electric rate. To learn more about this program, go to www.jackelec.com/dual-fuel-program or contact our office.

REMINDER

2020 Rebate
Application
Deadline

DECEMBER 31



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When it's time to pack away the ornaments and the holidays are over, your real Christmas tree still makes an environmental impact. Some consumers may choose to place their tree outdoors for the birds or animal habitat, but the most popular option is to recycle the tree into mulch.

Many FFA chapters, including Black River Falls FFA, host a Christmas tree pickup event. Twenty FFA members and adult drivers pick up trees across the city in one day after school. "We hope by offering an easy method of disposal there is one less hurdle to have a real Christmas tree," says Brad. "We take them to the city where the street crew will recycle them into mulch that city residents may access. A real tree that is recycled into mulch continues to provide ecosystems by retaining moisture, suppressing weed growth, and contributing organic matter to soils."

"Christmas trees are the center of the celebration, and there is an authenticity and nostalgia to having a real tree in your home during the holiday season," concludes Ashley. "There's always a story to picking out the tree, and it can restore family bonding and togetherness." —*Brandi Shramek, Member Relations Advisor*

Black River Falls FFA members pick up Christmas trees to be recycled into mulch.

Contributed photo



Christmas trees are at the center of the celebration.

Check out the campaign:
<https://itschristmaskeepitreal.com/>

We understand there may be circumstances in which you are not able to have a real Christmas tree, or you already own an artificial tree. However, please consider the following before purchasing a new artificial tree or throwing out an old one:

- Artificial trees are made from non-renewable, non-recyclable materials and will end up in a landfill where they will take years to break down.
- An artificial tree needs to be kept for at least 10 years to equate to the resources used in producing a real tree.
- If you're tossing your artificial tree, consider donating it first.
- If you're in the market for a new tree, consider buying used or purchasing real this year.



Jackson Electric is securing green power to offset 100 percent of the electricity use of its headquarters. This renewable energy comes from regional solar, wind, biogas and hydro resources, and is above and beyond state requirements.

Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) from these resources have been retired on behalf of the cooperative.



Jackson Electric's office will be closed:

Christmas Eve Day, December 24

Christmas Day, December 25

New Year's Day, January 1

Power outages can be reported to 855.222.3275.
Pay your bill with a debit or credit card at 844.759.3984
or use any of our online payment services.



Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

Customer Service 715.284.5385
800.370.4607

Outage Reporting 855.222.DARK (3275)

Diggers Hotline 800.242.8511

Credit Card Payments 844.759.3984

www.jackelec.com

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Office Hours: Monday – Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

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